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Spoken Language Interpreters and Signed Language Interpreters: Towards Cross-fertilization

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Abstract

This commentary aims to give an overview of developments in the related fields of spoken and signed language interpreting, with consideration given to professionalization, standards, education and training, and research. We base our discussion on our observations of the changing nature of the sister professions over the years, as the two related fields become more closely aligned. We propose that spoken and signed language interpreters can work more closely together to promote more cross-fertilization in interpreting studies.

Keywords: Spoken language interpreting, signed language interpreting, profession, status, training, education, standards, research

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Spoken Language Interpreters and Signed Language Interpreters: Towards Cross-fertilization

1. Introduction

In 2017, at the 30th anniversary celebration conference of the Association of Sign Language Interpreters UK (ASLI) in London, we co-presented a comparative overview of the spoken language interpreting and signed language interpreting fields, in which we expressed our shared hope that the two fields would get closer. In fact, we have seen just such a trend. In 2019, Jemina Napier was appointed CETRA chair professor¹ at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL). This was the first time a signed language interpreter was selected to be the guest professor at Antwerp's international doctoral summer school for translation and interpreting studies. Out of the 25 participants in the program that year, 12 were interpreters, and three had research projects involving both spoken and signed language interpreting. We welcome this inclusion of a signed language interpreter as professor, as well as the interest shown by all the participants at the CETRA school in signed language interpreting research. In this commentary, we offer an overview of our initial ASLI presentation and of recent developments, and we describe our hopes for the future.

2. Spoken language interpreting and signed language interpreting: A general comparison

We believe that a stereoscopic view of interpreting, from two different angles, has the potential of highlighting differences and similarities which are often either invisible in the separate interpreting communities or taken for granted, in order to foster better understanding of various phenomena and challenges for the benefit of trainers, researchers, practitioners and ultimately society as a whole. Napier (2015) has provided a detailed comparison of spoken and signed language interpreting, with a focus on the history and development of each field, current trends and future directions. In conclusion, she states “the future looks bright with possibilities of increasing collaboration and replication of research across modalities” (pp.139-140). In this commentary, it is not our intention to repeat what is in the 2015 chapter; instead we use broader brushstrokes to create a general comparison based on our observations, including developments since 2015.

2.1. *Fundamental technical differences between translation and interpreting, and spoken language interpreting and signed language interpreting*

For the sake of brevity, we will not address the obvious, such as the difference in modalities per se. However, in simultaneous interpreting in both spoken and signed interpreting, as well as in sight translation, the pressure to produce an accurate linguistic rendition of a speaker's utterance within seconds, generally without a possibility of revising one's output, has far-reaching implications both on what is feasible and on actual strategies and tactics.

Spoken and signed language interpreters

This is what makes interpreting quite different from written or signed translation. The translators' and interpreters' means of expression also differ markedly. All use language, but whereas translators have only language choices, and sometimes page layout and print styles to express messages, interpreters have language choices, prosody and other forms of voice modulation (in spoken language interpreting), as well as visual languaging practices, eye gaze gesture, body movement, and body posture (Davitti & Pasquandrea, 2017), the last two intrinsic to signing.

Another technical difference lies in the size of more or less standardized general and specialized lexicons. The lexicons of spoken languages are larger by at least one order of magnitude than the lexicons of signed languages, which creates challenges (Pointurier-Pournin, 2009; Swabey et al., 2016) and forces signed language interpreters to resort to various preparation strategies (see Nicodemus, Swabey & Taylor, 2014) and to different tactics when working into signed languages, e.g. fingerspelling (see for example, Nicodemus et al, 2017).

2.2. *Settings and modes*

Spoken language interpreters in conference and media settings work mostly in the simultaneous mode, but also in the 'long-consecutive' mode (with notes). In community interpreting and court interpreting, they mostly use 'short consecutive' (without notes), but sometimes use simultaneous and long consecutive as well. Signed language interpreters work predominantly in the simultaneous mode in all settings, and sometimes in the short consecutive mode in contexts where sensitive information is handled, particularly in medical and legal settings. In fact, signed language interpreters are particularly encouraged to use short consecutive or blended mode in these settings (Russell, Shaw & Malcolm, 2010). Most of their work is done in public service (community) and educational settings, though they are increasingly working as conference interpreters with deaf professionals in high-level political meetings and academic environments. The range of settings in which individual signed language interpreters work is thus generally far wider.

2.3. *Professionalization*

In spoken language interpreting, there is a sharp distinction in most countries between conference interpreters and community interpreters, demarcated by different working conditions, remuneration and qualification requirements. The gap is narrowing due to economic pressures, which sometimes force conference interpreters to accept the less favourable remuneration and working conditions of community interpreters.

Professionalization in spoken language interpreting started with conference interpreting. AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, was founded in 1953, and the professionalization process reached maturity decades ago, with codes of practice, training institutions and social recognition. Professionalization of spoken language community interpreting started much later, in the 1980s or 1990s, and is still evolving and struggling in many countries (Hale, 2007).

The professionalization of signed language interpreting began in the United States with the establishment of the first professional association, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), in 1964. Other countries followed. In Europe, the European Forum on Sign Language Interpreters (efsl) was founded in 1993, and internationally, the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) followed in 2005. Elsewhere, professionalization of signed language interpreting is still at an early or intermediate stage. In 1992, the former WASLI president called SLI an 'emerging profession' (Scott-Gibson, 1992). More than 25 years later, is this still the case? In some ways SLI could still be considered a fledgling profession, because there is still a lack of consistency worldwide.

2.4. *The self-image and social position of interpreters*

As is clearly expressed in internal discourse in conference interpreter training programs and illustrated by AIIC admission procedures and by various statements in the literature (e.g. Seleskovitch & Lederer 1984: 165-166, Pinhas, 1982), spoken language conference interpreters see themselves as highly educated and intelligent, with a near-perfect mastery of their working languages, capable of presenting in the target language a faithful image of a (high-level) speaker's speech. Reality is somewhat remote from this ideal, which interpreters and trainers aim to

Spoken and signed language interpreters

attain nevertheless through intensive training and practice. This has implications for student selection, and potential conference interpreting students often undergo stringent screening procedures to ensure that they have the linguistic competencies required. As such, conference interpreting has had a high professional status.

Spoken language community interpreters are regarded in a different light. Like signed language interpreters, they need to be versatile to work in a range of public service settings. Typically, they come from the language community that they serve. The focus of their training, if any, is typically on their role, ethical behaviour, terminology and interpersonal skills for dealing with the sensitive settings where they find themselves working (de Pedro Rico, 2010). Their professional status is low, and they are often incorrectly regarded by some as ‘helpers’ or advocates for their community.

For signed language interpreters, there tends to be a focus on signing fluency and more attention is given to relationships with deaf people, sometimes neglecting to remember that signed language interpreters work with both deaf *and* hearing people. But because interpreters themselves are often hearing, they find themselves in a situation of ‘fractious interdependence’ with deaf people (Napier, 2002). Deaf communities tend to give much weight to interpreters with the ‘right attitude’ and an alignment with the rights and interests of deaf people, with notions of empowerment for deaf people being central to working relationships (Holcomb & Smith, 2018).

2.5. Challenges in professional interpreting

In spoken language interpreting, the most frequently mentioned challenges include speed of delivery of source speeches, speeches read out without the interpreters having had the texts or the time to prepare their interpretation, cognitive problems related to remote interpreting, relays and multiple relays in multi-lingual conferences, foreign accents and English as a *lingua-franca*. The literature abounds with references to these problems (see for instance Pearl, 1999; Seeber, 2017).

In signed language interpreting, most of these challenges come in as well. In addition, physical environment problems such as lighting, the physical positioning of the interpreter, the frequency of lexical gaps, variability in signing ability and signing styles of interpreters and deaf people also capture one’s attention. For video relay interpreting, the two-dimensional screen onto which three-dimensional signing is mapped is also challenging when watching signed language production, but many challenges in video remote interpreting cross over spoken and signed language interpreting (see Napier, Skinner & Braun, 2018). Finally, issues of trust and acceptance by deaf community members are more salient in SLI (see Haug et al, 2017), although they are also observed in spoken language community interpreting (Edwards et al, 2005).

2.6. Ethical issues in professional interpreting

In spoken language conference interpreting, ethical issues are generally not perceived as challenging, as the principals tend to be peers, though power imbalances are not infrequent, and on the whole, interpreters feel they can act as mere vectors of the speakers’ messages. In spoken language community interpreting, ethical challenges are very salient. As mentioned earlier, interpreters typically identify strongly with the patient/client, most often a refugee or immigrant struggling in the complex medical, legal and social service systems of a new country and culture. This identification can lead to conflicting role expectations, to strong pressure by one party, to affective involvement and to frustration.

This also applies to signed language interpreting, where interpreters often tend to ally themselves with deaf people, who they sometimes explicitly view as having been treated unfairly by society. When they are hearing themselves and therefore part of the ‘oppressors,’ gaining the trust of deaf people is not a matter of course. This raises questions of role boundaries, of impartiality vs. commitment to fight inequality (De Meulder & Haualand, 2019).

Spoken and signed language interpreters

2.7. Professional status issues

For historical reasons and as mentioned earlier, spoken language conference interpreters started out with a high professional and financial status. This status has been declining but is still high, in particular thanks to the action of AIIC and to the influence of prestigious and highly selective graduate interpreter training programs.

Spoken language community interpreters started with a far lower status, with no professional recognition or public perception of the need for quality standards. This has evolved ever since the early 1990s, with the emergence of supporting legislation (in some countries), institutional accreditation, training and standards (ISO Community Interpreting). Their status and compensation have improved, but remain below those of conference interpreters with some disparities between countries.

Signed language interpreters also started with a low status as ‘helpers’, but professional standards were established early in the context of anti-disability legislation in some countries.

Their status has been improving with legal recognition of signed languages and with their increased visibility through television and social media, but it is strongly constrained by local political, sociocultural and economic contexts. Accreditation and training systems vary around the world, but strong guidelines for training and assessment have been developed, inter alia by the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsl)³ and the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT).

3. Interpreter training and education

Spoken language conference interpreter training began in the 1940s in various European universities with highly selective, mostly postgraduate programs. Mastery of all working languages (generally three or more) is a prerequisite for admission, and both admission and graduation rates have been low in what can be termed an elitist system (Pinhas, 1982).

Spoken language community interpreter training is far less selective, possibly due to the demand for interpreters in this sector, which typically outstrips conference or sign interpreting by at least two orders of magnitude. These training programs typically draw working adults from the community with some language proficiency and are relatively short, focusing more on role boundaries, ethical issues, interpreting protocols, behavioural norms, and dialogic interaction management. Community interpreting may thus have been perceived as less demanding, but this perception is changing, as more postgraduate community interpreter training programs are now being offered in various countries (Hale, 2007).

Historically, signed language interpreters ‘evolved’ from deaf communities, learning from deaf sign language users, but later became ‘schooled’ interpreters through formal education and training programmes (Cokely, 2005). The first SLI training initiatives, typically short courses, started in the USA in the 1960s. Training is now offered in a wide range of community colleges, vocational training programs and universities in various countries (Napier, 2009). Some postgraduate training is offered, but there is little incentive to gain further qualifications as there is no career progression structure – professional development training is required in many countries to maintain a credential, but no further formal education. Attrition rates in basic training programs are high, as unlike spoken language interpreter training, these programs do not require fluency in a signed language as a prerequisite for admission. As signed languages are rarely taught at school, most students entering an interpreting program are also learning to sign, and the learning curve is steep. Screening procedures have been tested for identifying applicants with the required language learning skills and personality attributes (Bontempo et al., 2014). Now that deaf sign language users have less of a gatekeeping role in who becomes a signed language interpreter, many educational providers are introducing principles of service learning into their programmes, so that interpreting students have to

³ See <http://efsl.org/publications/shop/> for guidelines on learning outcomes and assessment guidelines for interpreter training; <https://www.cit-asl.org/new/past-conferences/proceedings/> for access to CIT conference proceedings that variously discuss standards for training and assessment.

Spoken and signed language interpreters

devise projects that are of benefit to local deaf communities, to ensure that deaf people are still involved in training activities (Shaw, 2013).

4. Research into interpreting

4.1. A micro-overview of the development of TS, IS and TIS

Systematic research into interpreting started in the 1960s, roughly at the same time as Translation Studies (TS), that is, research into (mostly) written translation. Among the most prominent pioneer ‘practisearchers’, Danica Seleskovitch in the ‘West’ and Ghelley Chernov in the USSR and the ‘East’ stand out (Gile, 1994, 1995; Pöchhacker, 2004).

Interpreting Studies (IS) was initially ignored by TS, but was gradually acknowledged as part of the discipline. Its growth has been very fast over the past two decades, and it has acquired enough ‘critical mass’ to be considered autonomous, and to suggest that replacing TS by the more ‘federative’ TIS (Translation & Interpreting Studies) ‘umbrella-name’ is now appropriate.

IS initially addressed exclusively spoken language conference interpreting and focused on interpreting cognition before moving on to didactic applications. It started including spoken language community interpreting later. SLI research developed autonomously, but is gradually being integrated fully into IS, as is indeed suggested by the appointment of a signed language interpreter as the visiting Chair Professor of the CETRA Translation Studies Summer School in 2019. IS now also covers topics around professional environments, working conditions, quality expectations and perception, history and more (see Pöchhacker, 2015).

Methodologically speaking, after a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s when interpreting cognition was studied experimentally by psychologists (Oléron & Nanpon, Barik, Gerver, Goldman-Eisler – see Gile, 1994; Pöchhacker, 2004), their approach was criticized by practitioners, especially Seleskovitch and followers (see a review in Gile, 1995) who took over with introspection, classroom observation and speculation with little self-skepticism. A reaction occurred in the 1990s, with a clear aspiration to ‘more scientific’ research, including more engagement with existing theories, with knowledge and methods from cognate disciplines, more empirical research to test theories on the basis of data (Gile, 1994). For a long time, cognitive and didactic issues were the center of attention. The 1990s began to see more systematic research into community interpreting as well, with seminal works by Wadensjö (1998) (and Roy, 2000 as regards SLI), who showed that far from being neutral ‘conduits’ of messages, dialogue interpreters are active participants who also manage turn-taking among the principals as well as other aspects of the interaction. With this research, social and professional issues gained visibility. More recently, this development has also spread to spoken language conference interpreting research (e.g. Diriker, 2004).

Research into SLI mirrored research into spoken language interpreting in that it also started with experiments and exploration of cognitive issues, but it quickly moved on into examining roles, ethics, dialogic practice and interactional management. We now see a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as more interdisciplinary research. What can be qualified as a global ‘explosion’ of signed language interpreting research, which covers both process and product, has given rise to studies on themes such as teamwork strategies, and users’ perceptions and expectations.⁴

⁴ See the Gallaudet University Press Studies in Interpretation Series for examples: <http://gupress.gallaudet.edu/studies-in-interpretation.html>

5. Salient research issues and cooperation between spoken and signed language interpreting

Why should spoken language conference interpreters be interested in SLI? SLI is more complex than spoken language interpreting. On the cognitive side, besides understanding the source speech and producing a target speech, signed language interpreters need to interact with deaf persons who may sign to them while they are interpreting a speaker, and also mind their spatial position so as to see what they need to see and be seen at the same time. In addition, the high frequency of lexical gaps when working into sign languages forces them to be rapidly creative, which probably also entails higher cognitive load. Besides, they need to deal with highly variable signing styles and to adapt to deaf clients who may not have good mastery of their standard national sign language.

Looking at the work of SLIs could therefore raise awareness of phenomena that also exist in spoken language interpreting but have not been addressed yet because they are not salient enough. This includes the difference between a somewhat idealized discourse on conference interpreting, with interpreters who have perfect mastery of their working languages and can interpret speeches very faithfully in impeccable linguistic form with the less glamorous real situation, where the quality of language and the completeness and accuracy of information rendition suffer. They can also move from an interpreter-centered world view into a more user-centered view, something which is central in SLI.

As regards research into SLI, spoken language interpreters can take inspiration from studies that look at the importance of the interpreter's attitude in user satisfaction, at expectations which differ markedly from what is spelled out in professional codes of ethics, at the extent to which deaf users of SLI actually understand the interpreters' target speech, at SLI tactics that have to do with language, including International Sign. Spoken language interpreters can also learn from the rather large ethnographical and mixed methods research corpus found in SLI.⁵

Why should signed language interpreters be interested in spoken language interpreting, and in particular in conference interpreting? Perhaps because by looking at the foci of spoken language interpreting, including the conference setting, and at research on spoken language interpreting cognition, they can raise their own awareness of issues, methods and findings of some relevance to them, much in the same way as spoken language interpreters can benefit from looking at SLI.

Signed language interpreters may also be interested in what spoken language interpreters have included in their formalized ethics, standards and protocol documents. Spoken language conference interpreters have, to a large extent, determined their own standards, as opposed to the rather strong reliance of SLI on norms and expectations defined by deaf communities, which have given primacy to language and cultural heritage rights rather than to the interpreters' needs associated with the requirement to work professionally.

The higher status of spoken language conference interpreters is also a social phenomenon that signed language interpreters may be interested in, as well as their generally better working conditions and higher remuneration. The ambitious values of educational attainment and high-level professional training could also be an inspiring reference. Now that an AIIC Sign Language Network⁶ has been established, more signed language interpreters are becoming members of AIIC as conference interpreters, which could lead to a shift in the overall professional status of signed language interpreters. There could also be a move towards recognising the value of multilingualism in signed language interpreters, as there is for spoken language interpreters, at least in Europe and Africa.

6. Towards collaborative work?

There is clearly much common ground between spoken language interpreting and SLI, especially as regards community interpreting, and the differences make mutual neighbourly interest productive. There are already collective volumes with contributions from both, and one methodological volume written by a signed language

⁵ See earlier reference to Gallaudet University Press' Studies in Interpretation Series

⁶ <https://www.aiicsignlanguage.net>

Spoken and signed language interpreters

interpreter and a spoken language interpreter (Hale & Napier, 2013). Beyond this, however, comparative research and collaborative research could be even more productive.

For instance, studies of tactics and strategies with both modalities have the potential of highlighting processing differences linked to modalities, to linguistic issues, to user expectations, to norms and their effects on the output and on quality perception. Studies of quality perception in which both modalities are used would be equally interesting. Comparative studies of training methods, including student experience, the use of technological tools, and internship systems could help validate traditions or suggest changes.

At a time when the market puts increasing pressure on the interpreting profession(s) and creates some anxiety, widening horizons and prospects for cross-fertilization and productive cooperation in research are definitely welcome.

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Spoken and signed language interpreters

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ⁱ <https://arts.kuleuven.be/cetra>